



University of Pennsylvania  
**ScholarlyCommons**

---

Undergraduate Humanities Forum 2017-2018:  
Afterlives

Penn Humanities Forum Undergraduate Research  
Fellows

---

5-2018

# “I think heaven is ...”: Articulating Community in Elegy of the AIDS Crisis

Colin Lodewick  
*University of Pennsylvania*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.upenn.edu/uhf\\_2018](https://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2018)

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

Lodewick, Colin, ““I think heaven is ...”: Articulating Community in Elegy of the AIDS Crisis” (2018). *Undergraduate Humanities Forum 2017-2018: Afterlives*. 3.  
[https://repository.upenn.edu/uhf\\_2018/3](https://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2018/3)

This paper was part of the 2017-2018 Penn Humanities Forum on Afterlives. Find out more at <http://wolfhumanities.upenn.edu/annual-topics/afterlives>.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [https://repository.upenn.edu/uhf\\_2018/3](https://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2018/3)  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

# “I think heaven is ...”: Articulating Community in Elegy of the AIDS Crisis

## **Disciplines**

Arts and Humanities

## **Comments**

This paper was part of the 2017-2018 Penn Humanities Forum on Afterlives. Find out more at <http://wolfhumanities.upenn.edu/annual-topics/afterlives>.

“I think heaven is...”:  
Articulating Community in Elegy of the AIDS Crisis

Colin Lodewick  
2017–2018 Wolf Humanities Center Undergraduate Research Fellow  
University of Pennsylvania

Paul Monette wrote the eighteen elegies of his collection *Love Alone* in the five months after his lover Roger Horwitz died of AIDS-related causes on October 22, 1986. He states in the preface that he wrote them “one right after the other, with hardly a half day’s pause between.”<sup>1</sup> Roger died when the AIDS crisis was far from over, before any effective treatment for HIV had been developed. In the poem “Readiness,” Monette speculates a future in which he lays in a grave beside Roger:

...if we’re lucky some far-off  
men of our sort generations hence a pair  
of dreamy types strolling among the hill graves  
for curiosity’s sake this well may be  
in a time when dying is not all day and every  
house riven and they’ll laugh *Here’s 2 like us*  
won’t that be lovely Rog...<sup>2</sup>

Monette constructs an image of double comfort; the first being his reunion with Roger, the second the imagining of a future without AIDS, when queer lovers can stroll through the cemetery unburdened by the imminence of death. Though *Love Alone* is among the most emblematic works of AIDS poetry, it is by no means representative of the AIDS experience. What it does articulate, though, is the larger temporal disruption in the lives of gay men that AIDS introduced – the need to reimagine completely one’s own timeline because of the disease. In “Readiness,” Monette imagines a future world without pain, a distinct temporality that exists somewhere beyond the present. Relevant is José Esteban Muñoz’s central thesis in his work *Cruising Utopia*: “Queerness is essentially about the rejection of the here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”<sup>3</sup> Monette’s “far-off men of

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Monette, *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), xii.

<sup>2</sup> Monette, *Love Alone*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

our sort” represent this insistence. They don’t stroll together in the present, but in a hopeful future.

Muñoz argues for a turn away from antirelationality within the field of queer theory, which “replaced the romance of community with the romance of singularity and negativity.”<sup>4</sup> He looks to move away from the anti-social *No Future* of Lee Edelman and toward an insistence that queerness is an inherently future-looking state. But how can that insistence on the future, on the utopian, stand true when queerness appears to be an inherent and tangible driver of death? The AIDS crisis materialized a link between homosexuality and mortality, and forced a new scrutiny of queer, specifically gay, sex practices. “Our pleasures were never tolerated anyway; we took them. And now we must mourn them too,” states Douglas Crimp in his influential essay “Mourning and Militancy.”<sup>5</sup> The AIDS crisis caused a temporal disruption in the process of mourning, forcing the need to reconfigure understandings of loss and grief when death was so omnipresent, when so many had died and so many were still dying. And as Crimp argues, a whole culture of queerness and queer sex practices was lost as well.

Mourning and grieving find a home in the poetic genre of the elegy. To accommodate the dynamism of grief and different modes of mourning, it is a genre without fixed form, and is therefore suited to act as a capacious vessel. It can contain not just specific, individual losses, but the loss of many as well. During the AIDS crisis in the United States, loss was a pervasive and amorphous entity among queer communities, and much queer poetry of the period therefore assumed an elegiac mode. Loss became quotidian, a force moving ever closer until it became impossible not to anticipate or speculate one’s own imminent death. Though Crimp argued against elegiac or transcendent responses to the crisis in favor of more directly political ones,

---

<sup>4</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” *October* 51 (1989): 11.

AIDS poetry represents a distinct mode of mourning that radically disrupts the poetic tradition of the elegy. It does not look to console simply for the fact that consolation was impossible. Rather, queer elegy of the AIDS crisis mediates the conflict between death and sexuality and articulates the trauma of the possibility of self-annihilation. Such poetic works of mourning do not aim for understanding, but rather a solidarity and community that both exists in the present and projects out into multiple imagined futures. To combat a period of indeterminacy brought on by AIDS, poets of the crisis weaponized that indeterminacy and imbued their poetry with it, questioning the stability of the present and looking to others to share in that collective experience. Paradoxically, or perhaps understandably, these elegies often possess the trace of the utopian, the hope of a better tomorrow.

Elegies of the AIDS crisis are not widely separate from the rest of the elegiac tradition, though they address death as an ever-present entity rather than a specific event. Mourning is universal, and therefore there exist certain tropes common to the elegiac form. Peter Sacks, in *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, explains the genre's form. He lists conventional tropes: "the use of pastoral contextualization, the myth of the vegetation deity...the use of repetition and refrains, the reiterated questions, the outbreak of vengeful anger or cursing, the procession of mourners, the movement from grief to consolation, and the traditional images of resurrection."<sup>6</sup> Monette's eighteen elegies function very much as traditional elegies. In "The Worrying," for example, he exclaims: "the whole world ought to be masked."<sup>7</sup> The entire world, asks Monette, must bow to the fact of Roger's disease and protect him, mask

---

<sup>6</sup> Peter M. Sacks, "Interpreting the Genre: The Elegy and the Work of Mourning," in *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Monette, *Love Alone*, 11.

itself to prevent spreading infection. Such exasperated, desperate cries characterize the collection, but what sets it apart as distinctly in response to AIDS is Monette's self-elegizing.

"AIDS elegists may share inconsolability with other twentieth-century writers, but theirs comes from facing their own wasting in addition to others' deaths, sequencing a timetable of loss for the death-bound poet," writes Dagmawi Woubshet in *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS*.<sup>8</sup> Self-elegizing, he argues, is not a characteristic unique to poetry of the AIDS crisis. The death of another is always an affirmation of one's own mortality; the difference, rather, is the poet's proximity to death. Woubshet characterizes Monette's *Love Alone* as being as much about Roger's death as about Monette's own death. "From the beginning, loss is aggregating. Monette makes the passing of his lover, who died in October, inextricable from his own impending death," he argues.<sup>9</sup> The first poem of the series, "Here," concludes: "all / there is now is burning dark the only green / is up by the grave and this little thing / of telling the hill I'm here oh I'm here."<sup>10</sup> The poem is intensely focused on Monette's being left behind, his still living while his lover is dead. There is nothing in the world but darkness besides the grave and the act of asserting "I'm here." This final refrain, "I'm here oh I'm here," refers to the continued life of the speaker, his continued presence in the "here." It can also refer, though, to his specific place above the grave of his lover, a space that he too will soon occupy. In that sense, the "here" is dislodged from a firm position in the present. Rather, it comes to represent a pained yearning for an impossible embrace, an impossible, alternative temporality.

---

<sup>8</sup> Dagmawi Woubshet, "Lyric Mourning: Sorrow Songs and AIDS Elegy," in *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 31.

<sup>9</sup> Woubshet, "Lyric Mourning," 37.

<sup>10</sup> Monette, *Love Alone*, 3.

Monette's charged, mournful poems appear to articulate traditional grief. But in their dual position as elegies and self-elegies, their work of mourning is complicated. Eve Sorum, in her essay "Self-Elegy: Narcissistic Nostalgia or Proleptic Postmortem?," argues that "self-elegy is always proleptic and, therefore, uncertain about its status as memorial."<sup>11</sup> Though forceful and emotionally straightforward, Monette's poems retain a feeling of uncertainty that is emblematic of AIDS elegy and AIDS mourning more generally. How could there be any form of consoling poetry in a time of such massive and proximate loss? How can such poetry reach any semblance of a resolution? Within this complication, the focus of mourning turns back to the poet and those still living. In his essay "Using Up Words in Paul Monette's AIDS Elegy," Lloyd Kermode notes the focus on the self within Monette's poetry. He writes that "in the end the resurrection of the writer and not the dead one is the more powerful effect. This resurrected writer is the one who has witnessed, denied under the duress of loss, and returned via his own words to be witness of the past for future generations."<sup>12</sup> The act of witnessing becomes central within AIDS elegy. In the face of violent neglect by a bigoted and uncaring social environment, people with AIDS were left to express unrecognized loss. Thus rather than mourn in any traditional way, those affected by loss needed to simultaneously mourn their loved ones, themselves, as well as their own ability to mourn – and recognize the pain of that complicated process. By collapsing different modes of grief as such, poets of the crisis created a poetry of witnessing and affirming.

Though not focusing specifically on poetry of the AIDS crisis, Jahan Ramazani in his book *Poetry of Mourning* looks to reevaluate the modern elegy. "Once a more quiet tomb," he argues, "the elegy becomes a noisy columbarium, crammed with corpses ontological, aesthetic,

---

<sup>11</sup> Eve Sorum, "The Self-Elegy: Narcissistic Nostalgia or Proleptic Postmortem?" in *A Companion to Poetic Genre*, ed. Erik Martiny (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Lloyd Kermode, "Using Up Words in Paul Monette's AIDS Elegy," in *Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning*, ed. Christian Riegel (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005), 233.



and physical.”<sup>13</sup> The proximity of death within AIDS poetry emphasizes the already-common modernist rejection of consolation. The need to create a poetry of witness, thus placing the poet in the unique place of mourner and mourned, adds to this effect. AIDS elegy resists consolation in more than just its situation within the modern moment. In the chapter “Beyond Mourning and Melancholia: AIDS Elegies” in her book *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shape of Elegy*, Melissa Zeiger explains the more ethical complications of mourning within AIDS poetry. She states that, “Even in poems that are not overtly political, elegiac closure tends to be viewed as a form of collusion with mechanisms that represent those who have died as wholly other or waste, and thereby allow or persuade the larger culture to leave unexamined its often premature ‘burial’ of the dead.”<sup>14</sup> The jagged, unclosed nature of AIDS elegy permits an interesting means by which poets can look for hope or subtle consolation. In Mark Doty’s six-part poem “Atlantis,” for example, the presence of mourning is shrouded within layers of dream and narrative, thus complicating even the ability to comprehend loss. Doty records the compounding losses of friends and his own lover, Wally. Beginning section four, “Atlantis,” he writes: “I thought your illness a kind of solvent / dissolving the future a little at a time.”<sup>15</sup> More than record a specific loss, the six sections of the poem record a timetable of loss that reflects the difficulty inherent in mourning during a period of mass death.

When considering AIDS poetry, it’s helpful to look back to other, similar periods of mass loss to understand how such poetry reinvents the act of mourning. The nuclear age provides an

---

<sup>13</sup> Jahan Ramazani, “Introduction,” in *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Melissa Zeiger, “Beyond Mourning and Melancholia: AIDS Elegies,” in *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shape of Elegy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 107.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Doty, “Atlantis,” in *Atlantis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 57.

analogous experience in poetry, and Lorine Niedecker, in her poem “The radio talk...”, establishes well the trauma of anticipation:

The radio talk this morning  
was of obliterating  
the world

I notice fruit flies rise  
from the rind  
of the recommended  
melon<sup>16</sup>

Within the space between the poem’s two stanzas there is a weight of unspoken fear. The nonchalant, progressively shortening lines of the first stanza condense and crystallize a sense of doom. They move from the simplified conversation of “radio talk,” which emphasizes the speaker’s apathy, to obliteration, and then to the object of obliteration: the world. Structured as such, the stanza gains potency primarily through its sinister understatement. It also introduces an interesting temporal construction, beginning with a loaded memory of the near past. The poem becomes even more banal in tone (and content) in the second stanza, more apathetic, as it shifts in time to the present. Beginning with the first person “I notice,” the stanza draws the reader’s attention to what the speaker might not be noticing as a result. The fruit flies are devoted first-person, present attention in the second stanza, but the idea of apocalypse is presented only as a detached, offhand memory from the past in the first. Even the melon of the second stanza gains a focus that seems more important than the radio talk of the first stanza. It is not only a melon, but the *recommended* melon, one that is for some reason better than the rest. Thus, the poem succinctly encapsulates a difficult relationship with potential trauma, one that borders on blithe indifference. That indifference is not complete, though. The skipper-over violence of the first

---

<sup>16</sup> Lorine Niedecker, “The radio silence...” in *Atomic Ghost: Poets Respond to the Nuclear Age*, ed. John Bradley (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1995), 72.

stanza perhaps signals a sort of amnesia or conscious forgetting. The obliteration of the world, though regarded passingly, still looms over the entire poem. “The radio talk...” thus does well to elucidate how poets of the AIDS crisis also confronted death and annihilation as an ambience rather than as ideas alien or unthinkable.

The proximity of death in queer AIDS elegy plays into another, larger narrative of difference and denigration: the question of queer visibility. Though grief and mourning are universal processes, and though AIDS elegies exist on a larger elegiac continuum, not everyone is necessarily allowed to grieve – at least not publicly. Besides the inherent nuance of each individual articulation of grief, boundaries exist at a more macro level that complicate the process for certain groups. In her essay “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” Judith Butler asks, “if someone is lost, and that person is not someone, then what and where is the loss, and how does mourning take place.”<sup>17</sup> Butler wrote the essay, one among a series of five in her collection *Precarious Life*, in the aftermath of 9/11, when there was a condition of “heightened vulnerability and aggression” in the United States.<sup>18</sup> The question of visibility, of what it means to be “someone,” is a question that comes with marginalization. Queerness always comes with that question of visibility, and thus during the AIDS crisis, queer poets needed to mediate their own visibility and how that visibility could manifest in their work. Often, that resulted in an appeal to the collective, the presence of the “I” and the “we” in a catastrophic, shared experience.

Muñoz states in his introduction: “To some extent *Cruising Utopia* is a polemic that argues against antirelationality by insisting on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity.”<sup>19</sup> Queerness, rather than a celebration of negative individuality, is a

---

<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 32.

<sup>18</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, xi.

<sup>19</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 11.

state of potential belonging. Muñoz cites the invocation of the collective “we” in queer discourse and argues that “we” can have a utopian significance. He references a 1971 manifesto issued by a group calling itself Third World Gay Revolution, a manifesto that asserted: “We want a new society.”<sup>20</sup> Muñoz argues that the “we” in the manifesto might be mistakenly read as the flat “we” of identity politics, but that it should instead be read as a “we” of potentiality. He explains: “The ‘we’ is not content to describe who the collective is but more nearly describes what the collective and the larger social order could be, what it should be.”<sup>21</sup> “We” includes a potentiality that welcomes all particularities of identity. It does not so much define a group, but leaves the doors open for everyone to come in.

In contrast to the collective “we” of the Third World Gay Revolution’s manifesto, Muñoz argues, is the “we” of assimilationist queer discourse. He cites the text “All Together Now (A Blueprint for the Movement)” – something of a manifesto authored by pro-gay-marriage lawyer Evan Wolfson. Wolfson’s rhetoric, per Muñoz, “posits an ‘all’ that is in fact a few: queers with enough access to capital to imagine a life integrated within capitalist North American capitalist culture.”<sup>22</sup> Further, assimilationist tendencies within the queer community favor bodies considered ‘normative’ – typically white, abled, straight-passing men and women. Queer bodies falling outside of traditional gender categories become excluded. Crimp agrees with the narrow-mindedness and exclusivity of queer assimilation: “This means purging our community of ‘fringe gay groups’ – drag queens, radical fairies, pederasts, bull dykes, and other assorted scum.”<sup>23</sup> AIDS elegy does not permit exclusion for the fact of the massiveness of the AIDS crisis, for the fact that it was a time of non-discriminating death.

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” 13.

The final poem in D. A. Powell's collection *Cocktails*, titled "[coda & discography]," describes a collective unity that mirrors Crimp's list of "assorted scum." Powell welcomes "voyeurs, passion flowers, trolls, twinks, dancers, cruisers, lovers without lovers," to "the door marked HEAVEN."<sup>24</sup> Powell, whose poems deal subtly but forcefully with his own experience with AIDS, recognizes that the queer community is a diverse one and that unity is the answer that might bring forth a better future, even if that future is an afterlife, a heaven. There is no room for exclusivity, he implies, in a time when everyone is affected by death. Stephen Burt in his essay on Powell titled, "Here is the Door Marked HEAVEN," notes that throughout the collection, Powell presents "gay persistence and gay pleasure as a triumph over the corruption they appear to incorporate."<sup>25</sup> Powell exalts the nuances and expansiveness of queer identity, the specifics that often cause the ostracizing of queerness, and looks to normalize it and take it as the impetus for community.

Collectivity can be present even when it seems to be absent. In the preface to *Love Alone*, Monette muses: "The story that endlessly eludes the decorum of the press is the death of a generation of gay men." The profundity and hugeness of the calamity forced Monette to understand collectivity. "I learned too well what it means to be a people," he states.<sup>26</sup> Though the elegies of *Love Alone* are intensely personal accounts of loss, still they exalt solidarity, or at least the act of making grief public. Though they appear to be private acts of mourning and recovery, they are additionally guides to assist others who are struggling. Monette proclaims the fact that AIDS death is not an isolated occurrence, but a shared experience in loss.

---

<sup>24</sup> D. A. Powell, *Cocktails* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004), 65.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Burt, "Here is the Door Marked HEAVEN: D. A. Powell," in *American Poets in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The New Poetics*, ed. Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007). 91.

<sup>26</sup> Monette., xiii.

Woubshet notes the Wilfred Owen epitaph that begins Monette's preface. The epitaph cautions against the conflation of poetry and politics, asserting: "Above all I am not concerned with poetry."<sup>27</sup> Though careful not to draw comparisons between his own work and Owen's, which concerned the horrors of World War I, Monette seeks to assert the same idea, that his work does not seek to handle grief beautifully or tenderly but to record it truthfully, so that all those enduring the same can understand that they are not alone. Woubshet states that, "It is out of this affective affinity, this solidarity, that Monette's practice is born."<sup>28</sup> The specific hope for a better tomorrow is difficult to locate within Monette's elegies, but his intention is clear: he aims to create work that joins people together. And togetherness, collectivity, can be a utopian effort.

Queer collectivity extends beyond just the general coming-togetherness that the AIDS crisis brought about. It is present as well in specific manifestations, in certain locations. The New York City AIDS Memorial opened in 2016 on December 1 – World AIDS Day. It's a geometric pavilion of white-painted steel above a granite fountain and a patio engraved with excerpts from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." It's located beside the former St. Vincent's Hospital, where the city's first and largest AIDS ward was housed.<sup>29</sup> The hospital is considered the epicenter of the AIDS crisis in New York, and the image of the hospital more generally came to serve as an unlikely locus for the new visibility of queer collectivity. In his poem "In the Waiting Room," David Bergman meditates on this queer visibility. "Sometimes two or three men are waiting / to be called—not by name—but number / to preserve our anonymity," he writes.<sup>30</sup> The collectivity of the poem is a negative one, a frightening one. Later, he sees a man in a laboratory coat

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>28</sup> Woubshet, "Lyric Mourning," 42.

<sup>29</sup> "About," The New York City AIDS Memorial, accessed May 21, 2018, <https://nycaidsmemorial.org/about/>.

<sup>30</sup> David Bergman, "In the Waiting Room," in *Poets for Life*, ed. Michael Klein (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1989), 66.

speaking with a patient and becomes angry, “for with his neat beard and curly hair / and the whiteness of his freckled face, / he might be taken for my lover.”<sup>31</sup> There’s something ubiquitous about the way the doctor and the patient talk, something too friendly and nonchalant that betrays the gravity of their situation.

The poem returns in the final stanza to the refrain common to so many elegies: “Bring him back, bring him back, the one who / gave me this healing touch.”<sup>32</sup> The poem concentrates heavily in the final stanza on the intensely self-conscious self-elegizing that marks AIDS elegy as different from other elegies. Though its emphasis is on the “I” rather than on the collective “we,” the poem still revolves around collective suffering. Moving through clinical language and reflecting the frigidity and sterility of the hospital, Bergman honestly presents the terror of the hugeness of the calamity, the numbing omnipresence of death that could turn the anonymity of any man into the familiarity of a lover. Thus though the poem is one of frightened personal experience, it is still a poetry of witnessing.

The exact utopian feeling of the collective “we” is felt with impossibly subtle strength in Mark Doty’s “Tiara.” The elegy for the first five stanzas follows the death of the mononymous Peter and the tension present at his wake, which breaks when “someone guessed / the casket closed because / he was *in there in a big wig / and heels*.”<sup>33</sup> This humor shared among friends who understand Peter’s queerness, if not friends who are queer themselves, is the first instance of collectivity in the piece – the ability to remain lighthearted in the face of the death of a friend. The group present at the wake seeks solace together in remembering Peter’s quirks, in the fact that “*he’s always late, / he probably isn’t here yet– / he’s still fixing his makeup*.”<sup>34</sup> In the humor

---

<sup>31</sup> Bergman, “In the Waiting Room,” 31.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Doty, “Tiara,” in *Poets for Life*, ed. Michael Klein (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1989), 66.

<sup>34</sup> Doty, “Tiara,” 66.

that breaks the tense sadness, there's a glimmer of queer hope, that despite Peter's death, things will still be alright.

The poem turns though, with the first line of the sixth stanza: "And someone said he asked for it."<sup>35</sup> Doty then repeats, "Asked for it–," as if taken aback by the idea. In the same stanza, effectively the same breath, he goes on to refute the subtle judgement of Peter's choices that left him dead. The last line of the stanza continues: "when all he did was go down." And the next stanza picks up the thought:

into the salt tide

of wanting as much as he wanted,  
giving himself over so drunk  
or stoned it almost didn't matter who,

though they were beautiful,  
stampeding into him in the simple,  
ravishing music of their hurry.<sup>36</sup>

The immediate defense of Peter is loaded with the normalization of his sexuality, with the equation of sexual gratification as the simple indulgence of want. The articulation of sex is simplified so that it flows like water, crystallized to the most essential form of desire. Risky anonymous sex becomes hurried, beautiful men "stampeding" into him, satiating their "simple" desire. Sex becomes the "music of their hurry." The feeling of rapidity with which Doty injects his language presents desire as essential to Peter's life, just as desire is essential to everyone else's. He presents Peter's death as unavoidable, as the end result of something as undeniable as music.

Once Doty establishes the justification of Peter's desire, the poem turns again. He assumes a utopic 'we,' and constructs an image of heaven:

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



I think heaven is perfect stasis  
poised over the realms of desire,

where dreaming and waking men lie  
on the grass while wet horses  
roam among them, huge fragments

of the music we die into  
in the body's paradise.  
Sometimes we wake not knowing

how we came to lie here,  
or who has crowned us with these temporary,  
precious stones.<sup>37</sup>

The poem turns from a biographical, humorous, and touchingly honest account of Peter's wake to an extended imagining of a collective future of queer bliss. The assertion "I think heaven is perfect stasis" is the first insertion of the first person in the poem. Its forcefulness is defensive and wounded. Beyond this "I," though, is the more powerful "we." "The music we die into," and "Sometimes we wake not knowing / how we came to lie here." And finally, the poem concludes: "what could any of us ever do / but ask for it." The lighthearted banter of the first five stanzas becomes too much in the face of the reality of queer pain and death. The poem continually seeks to argue for Peter's place in the world, and by association the place of non-normative sexuality in the world. How can you say that Peter asked for it, that any of us asked for it, Doty demands, when he did nothing but give into his own desire?

Through the construction of a queer heaven, Doty questions the place of queerness in the present, and in doing so returns to Muñoz's central thesis, to the idea that within queerness there is an "insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."<sup>38</sup> The imagined paradise is one of unquestioned sexuality, populated by "dreaming" and "waking" men – two

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>38</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

states of constant potentiality. The wet horses among them call back to the lovers “stampeding” into Peter, and the “music we die into” again calls back to Peter and the music of his desire. Above all, Doty’s heaven is one of non-judgement and painlessness, of total acceptance.

The image of queer paradise, though, necessarily comes with the need to justify the existence of that paradise. “Sometimes we wake not knowing / how we came to lie here,” Doty writes.<sup>39</sup> Despite the perfection of the imagined utopic space, there is always the question of why it exists and why (and if) those there deserve it. Concluding the poem asking “what could he do, / what could any of us ever do / but ask for it,” is a jagged return to the reality of Peter’s death and his wake.<sup>40</sup> He asserts the inherent need that undermines the condescending remark of “asking for it.” There is no alternative for Doty, for Peter, or for “any of us” – the draws of queerness are too essential. He qualifies this essentiality too, arguing that there is never a choice, given:

the world’s perfectly turned shoulders,  
the deep hollows blued by longing,  
given the irreplaceable silk

of horses rippling in orchards,  
fruit thundering and chiming down,  
given the ordinary marvels of form

and gravity<sup>41</sup>

Doty’s series of images is a difficult one that succeeds in creating an ambience of desperation in the poem. Noting “the world’s perfectly turned shoulders,” Doty captures the apathy with which the queer community was treated during the AIDS crisis (and in general). There’s a tragedy in those shoulders, an essentiality almost as powerful as queer desire, and therefore just a difficult to counteract. Perhaps it was the world’s “perfectly turned shoulders”

---

<sup>39</sup> Doty, “Tiara,” 67.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

that prompted Monette to note in his preface the fact that the death of a “generation of gay men” was absent from the media. The world forgets queerness, turning longing for community and connection into “deep hollows,” and for desire to take the form of rippling horses and chiming fruit. Even just “ordinary marvels” are enough to argue that it is impossible to not “ask for it.”

The inclusive, utopic heaven is present as well, though differently, in D.A. Powell’s “[coda & discography].” The poem ends his collection *Cocktails*, which in turn closes a series of three collections that includes one titled *Tea* and another titled *Lunch*. Published between 1998 and 2004, the poems of the three collections trace an arc that follows the changing AIDS landscape for the HIV-positive Powell. Few of the poems in any of the three collections have formal titles, but rather have working titles taken from the first line of each. “[coda & discography]” is an exception, and even comes with a first line that perhaps functions as a second title: “a song of paradise.” He writes:

to enter that queer niteclub, you step over the spot: sexworker stabbed  
reminds me of the chalk outlines on castro street or keith haring’s canvases

missing. beaten. died at the end of a prolonged illness. a short fight

phantoms of the handsome, taut, gallant, bright, slender, youthful: go on  
the garment that tore: mended. the body that failed: reclaimed

voyeurs, passion flowers, trolls, twinks, dancers, cruisers, lovers without lovers

here is the door marked HEAVEN: someone on the dancefloor, waiting just for you...<sup>42</sup>

Powell opens the final poem with the familiar assertion of the interconnectedness of queerness and death. His “queer niteclub” has a specific placelessness that reinforces the ambience of death; the nightclub isn’t known, but still it is *that* nightclub, the one that is dripping with death, where the “you” of the poem needs to step over the spot of a murdered sex worker.

---

<sup>42</sup> Powell, *Cocktails*, 65.

But still there's a recovery of loss that transforms into collective strength. The phantoms of dead queer individuals march into the club, their spectral quality at odds with their physical and exorbitant beauty. The force of the poem comes in part from the division between the speaker's commanding voice and the audience's passivity. There's a godlike quality in the voice of the speaker, or at least an intense confidence, that allows him to simply declare heaven. It's important to note that the door does not lead to heaven, but rather the door to heaven *is* the welcome of someone on the dancefloor – a state of constant potentiality and hope. The equation reinforces Muñoz's advocacy for a queer, inclusive, and utopian "we" – a camaraderie of queer connection. Heaven "is not, cannot be, Powell's alone," argues Burt.<sup>43</sup> And besides, the idea of heaven being a welcoming dance floor is very much a specifically queer iteration of heaven, of utopia.

Heaven as the representation of temporal disruption can also exist in more subtle forms, including a return to the past. The final poem of Paul Monette's *Love Alone*, "Brother of the Mount of Olives," describes a discovery. The elegy opens: "combing the attic for anything extra / missed or missing evidence of us." The search is successful – Monette finds a roll of undeveloped film, spurring him to "race it to SUNSET / PLAZA ONE-HOUR wait out the hour wacko / as a spy smuggling a chip that might decode / World War III." The film contains, among snapshots of "Christmas '83," a photograph of Monette and his lover Roger from a trip in Italy, a photo replicated on the page before the title page.<sup>44</sup> The photograph's latent discovery is what Muñoz would call the ephemera of queer existence. "Think of ephemera as trace," Muñoz recommends, "the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor."<sup>45</sup> Due to the

---

<sup>43</sup> Burt, "Here is the Door Marked HEAVEN: D. A. Powell," 93.

<sup>44</sup> Monette, *Love Alone*, 60.

<sup>45</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 65.

inability for queerness to inhabit straight temporality, often the only evidence of queerness is found in such ephemera. The half smiles of Monette and Roger, Roger's arms looped lightly around Monette's – the gestural staging of the photograph, and the act of its loss and rediscovery all hint at the inevitable invisibility of queerness. "We can understand queerness itself as being filled with the intention to be lost," argues Muñoz.<sup>46</sup> Within this impulse to be lost, though, remains a constant potentiality, a potentiality evident in Monette's rediscovery of the photograph and his transformation of the photograph into a final elegy. An elegy that revisits an ideal past through evidence of queer existence, and imagines a time when that past exists in stasis.

The stasis of an ideal past represents another iteration of temporal disruption in AIDS elegy. Though Monette's final poem elaborates on a specific, intimate relationship, that mediation in itself is an act that reaffirms queer community. Joseph Cady in "Immersive and Counterimmersive Writing About AIDS: The Achievement of Paul Monette's *Love Alone*" focuses on this final poem of the series. He identifies two different modes of writing that came out of the AIDS crisis, "immersive" writing that places the reader immediately in the emotional tumult of the crisis, and "counterimmersive" writing that focuses on AIDS-denying characters and more subtle investigations of the epidemic. He places the eighteen poems of *Love Alone* squarely within the realm of "immersive" writing. One benefit of Monette's immersive style, Cady argues, is its act of witnessing. He states that, "Beseiged by AIDS, his gay male readers can still have historical, public, and private occasions to take heart."<sup>47</sup> Still, though, Cady recognizes the larger frame of the poem – the recognition and happiness contained within it are

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>47</sup> Joseph Cady, "Immersive and Counterimmersive Writing About AIDS: The Achievement of Paul Monette's *Love Alone*," in *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, ed. Timothy Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 252.

still the result of an accidental discovery, the of a forgotten memory retrieved from the clutter of an attic.

Considering the poets described in depth in this essay, it might seem easy to point to the AIDS crisis as a definitive marker of disruption within the lives of (largely) queer men. But that assumption grossly obscures the fact of other oppressions that intersected with the AIDS crisis and still persist. Poetry of the AIDS crisis is a massive, difficult archive, and these poems present only a certain mode through which to view the act of mourning within the crisis, a mode that hinges upon precariousness, vulnerability, and community. But they should not generalize the effects of mourning in its entirety. Woubshet quotes John Clum in his chapter “Lyric Mourning,” a scholar who argues that in white AIDS elegies there’s often “the encroachment of AIDS on the American dream of beauty, affluence, and immortality.”<sup>48</sup> Recording the disruption of an idyllic pre-AIDS life is a distinctly privileged stance to be writing from, one that poets of color did not have. Though Woubshet argues that the quality that makes AIDS poetry notable is the proximity of death to the poet, he underscores the nuances within that relationship of closeness. He elaborates, “I am suggesting that, given the persistence of death in black collective life and imagination, black AIDS mourners, including well-to-do poets like Dixon, rarely thought of AIDS as an isolated calamity, but rather saw it as one in a series of calamities that characterized their people and their country.”<sup>49</sup> Melvin Dixon, a black poet of the crisis, did not experience the radical turn away from American privilege that, say, Paul Monette did. Thus, his poetry represents a different means of interacting with the timetable of loss that Woubshet explains in his essay. However, Dixon, like all AIDS poets, still participates in the very specific temporal disruption of the epidemic.

---

<sup>48</sup> John Clum, quoted in Woubshet, “Lyric Mourning,” 42

<sup>49</sup> Woubshet, “Lyric Mourning,” 44.

Introducing his collection *Tea*, D. A. Powell writes: “This is not about being queer and dying. It is about being human and living.”<sup>50</sup> The ability to reject queerness is perhaps the most forceful assertion of queerness, one that displaces its otherness and situates it squarely within what is normal, or what should be normal. Providing evidence of queer existence in the form of poetry, and further in the form of queer AIDS elegy (though Powell even largely rejects elegy – another fact that emphasizes his rejection of otherness), Powell reaches for a different future, a new, more accepting temporality. It’s an expansion of the collective, utopian “we” that Muñoz expounds, an attempt to situate queerness in the everyday. Judith Butler, in meditating on mass loss following 9/11, underscores what Powell attempts to do in his introductory gesture. “Despite our differences in location and history,” she writes, “my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a ‘we,’ for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all.”<sup>51</sup> Poetry, specifically elegy, of the AIDS crisis proposes a tragic mode of coming-together in the face of mass trauma, a shaky community formation born from the rejection of the painful here-and-now.

---

<sup>50</sup> D. A. Powell, *Tea*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), xiv.

<sup>51</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20.

## Bibliography

- "About." The New York City AIDS Memorial. Accessed May 21, 2018.  
<https://nycaidsmemorial.org/about/>.
- Bergman, David. "In the Waiting Room." In *Poets for Life*, edited by Michael Klein. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1989.
- Burt, Stephen, "Here is the Door Marked HEAVEN: D. A. Powell." In *American Poets in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The New Poetics*, edited by Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.
- Cady, Joseph. "Immersive and Counterimmersive Writing About AIDS: The Achievement of Paul Monette's *Love Alone*." In *Writing AIDS: Gay Literature, Language, and Analysis*, edited by Timothy Murphy and Suzanne Poirier. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Crimp, Douglas. "Mourning and Militancy." *October* 51 (1989): 3-18.
- Doty, Mark. *Atlantis*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.
- Doty, Mark. "Tiara." In *Poets for Life*, edited by Michael Klein. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1989.
- Kermode, Lloyd. "Using Up Words in Paul Monette's AIDS Elegy." In *Response to Death: The Literary Work of Mourning*, edited by Christian Riegel. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005.
- Monette, Paul. *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Niedecker, Lorine. "The radio talk..." In *Atomic Ghost: Poets Respond to the Nuclear Age*, edited by John Bradley. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1995.
- Powell, D. A. *Cocktails*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2004.
- Powell, D. A. *Tea*. Middlebury: Wesleyan University Press, 2000.
- Ramazani, Jahan. "Introduction." In *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heany*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.



- Sacks, Peter M. "Interpreting the Genre: the Elegy and the Work of Mourning." In *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spencer to Yeats*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987.
- Sorum, Eve. "The Self-Elegy: Narcissistic Nostalgia or Proleptic Postmortem?" In *A Companion to Poetic Genre*, edited by Erik Martiny. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Woubshet, Dagmawi. "Lyric Mourning: Sorrow Songs and AIDS Elegy." In *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015.
- Zeiger, Melissa. "Beyond Mourning and Melancholia: AIDS Elegies." In *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.

Imagined Lesson (Elegy for A)  
by Colin Lodewick

I learn what the machines mean when the clicker stops,  
when the ball settles slowly in the womb,  
and the lights dim until  
the swelling red glow is gone,  
announcing that it's time to grow taller,  
towards the edge at least.

But even still the day feels tired.  
He knew the things I know now  
but earlier –  
how to tread above the ground  
and do so quietly.  
Still he went further –  
let himself first turn silver,  
and then he flickered between two poles of yes.

Now I walk toward the bricked-up place.  
The one he showed me.  
The one we visited together.  
The one where he rested his head on my shoulder.